

# Afghanistan Redux



## Ex-Political Officer Now Finds Security, Development

Story and photos by Daniel R. Green, Soref Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

When I arrived in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, in 2005 to work as the U.S. Department of State political officer to the Tarin Kowt Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), the province was an isolated enclave of Pashtuns with no paved roads, cell phone coverage, electricity, girls' schools or even decent health care facilities or educational opportunities.

Though not considered a strategic province due to its small size, Uruzgan had played a large role in Afghanistan history and was the starting point of President Karzai's 2001 effort to launch an uprising against the Taliban by taking advantage of his network of tribal allies in the area.

The insurgency was more a nuisance than an existential threat to the nascent Afghan provincial government, which was led by a one-eyed warlord. Most government departments were similarly led by poorly educated leaders with little sense of public service. Our efforts to promote good governance, development and reconstruction were well received but quite modest in light of the insuperable needs of the people.

When I departed Uruzgan in November 2005 after a 10-month tour, the 90-person PRT had made steady progress. It had facilitated successful elections of the Provincial Council and Wolesi Jirga (lower house of Parliament), constructed the first girls' school and several others, and finished paving a road linking the province to Afghanistan's main highway, among other improvement projects. We had accomplished a lot for a province with five districts and

more than 250,000 people spread out into hundreds of isolated villages tucked into craggy valleys and scorching deserts.

I returned to Uruzgan in June 2006 at the invitation of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to ease the transition of the PRT from American to Dutch control. Although I had only been away seven months, the province had gone from being a relatively peaceful place, where our actions were focused on peace-keeping and development, to a place of open warfare with hundreds of Taliban fighting throughout the province, preventing much of our work. This was due, in part, to the alienation of the population by the predatory behavior of government officials, a drawdown of U.S. troops in the area and the small numbers of Afghan security forces.

Throughout southern Afghanistan in 2006, the Taliban insurgency returned with a size, intensity and lethality unprecedented since the U.S. invasion in 2001. Gone were the brief firefights, when the Taliban would break contact because Coalition air support was on the way, and the infrequent attacks involving improvised explosive devices, which occurred mostly on the margins of the province. The insurgency in 2006 was larger, more disciplined and increasingly operating in a conventional military manner. The Taliban were now overrunning district centers, attacking our forward operating bases and using more advanced tactics such as sniping, suicide attacks and combined operations. While the PRT continued to function, the violence severely limited our freedom of maneuver, and many of our programs had to be suspended.

The relatively peaceful years of 2001 to 2005 in Uruzgan had been shown to be a false peace, as the Taliban insurgency geared up to reassert control of the province and push the Afghan government and Coalition forces out. It was clear that no matter how adept we were at fighting the Taliban, we weren't achieving a sustainable Afghan-led security. We weren't losing, but we certainly weren't winning.

When I arrived back in Uruzgan in 2012 for an eight-month tour as a mobilized reservist with the U.S. Navy, I felt incredibly lucky to see the immense changes that had taken place in the province. I was serving as a tribal and political engagement officer, using my relationships with local tribal members and provincial government members to advise U.S. military units operating in the area.

Sometimes it's the small details that tell you a profound shift has taken place. The chaotic urgency of a province in open warfare had been replaced by a feeling of stability and a community confident in its ability to provide security for its residents. Police wore their uniforms, no small feat, and there were plenty of them throughout the provincial capital and around the area. The town of Tarin Kowt had a bustling bazaar and a rural sprawl of unplanned development because the paved road linking the province to Kandahar had been extended into the surrounding districts. The Afghan Army had a much larger presence, and the U.S. Special Operations Forces Village Stability Operations program had increased Afghan Local Police forces in the villages.

Much larger security forces in the area and more mature Afghan institutions were clearly making a difference. The province had also seen a significant increase in development, including complete cell phone coverage, a girls' high school, additional clinics and roads, six new bridges, a new college, plans for a stadium and an expanded provincial government presence. The governor was an educated and competent leader, and provincial departments were now led by trained personnel who increasingly had the resources to provide basic



**Above:** The author meets with Uruzgan Province's governor, Jan Mohammed Khan, in November 2005. **Below:** The author visits the house where Uruzgan Province's election ballots are counted in 2005. **Opposite page:** Trees endure in the windswept landscape of Uruzgan Province circa 2005.

services. While suicide attacks and assassinations were still a concern, the Taliban insurgency could no longer muster hundreds of fighters for the kinds of conventional assaults it had mounted in 2006 and subsequent years.

At the PRT, there were also changes. It was now led by the Australian government, after the Dutch departed in 2010, and its resources, staff and capability had significantly increased. While most of the approximately 20 civilians in the PRT were from Australia, the U.S. contingent had doubled. The U.S. Embassy now had the Interagency Provincial Affairs office in Kabul to provide more focused direction to development in the provinces, something lacking in 2005-2006. Additional support came from a more robust civilian presence and leadership at Regional Command-South.

Although I was with the military this time, I knew that pre-deployment training for Department employees had improved significantly due to the civilian expeditionary training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana, which has a simulated forward operating base. In many respects, Afghan governing capacity—greater numbers of trained personnel, greater institutional capacity and more mature processes—mirrored our own development in this regard.

As the transition process moves forward, I have had the great privilege to witness how one small part of Afghanistan has navigated the waxing and waning of the insurgency, the shift of the war to NATO control, changing U.S. policy in the country and the maturation of Afghan institutions and politics. While nothing is certain in Afghanistan and some things may be revealed only with time, I am optimistic that, at least in Uruzgan Province, the Afghans are well prepared to take responsibility for their future and turn their backs on the insurgency, with its false promises of a better tomorrow. ■

*Daniel R. Green is the author of The Valley's Edge: A Year with the Pashtuns in the Heartland of the Taliban (Potomac Books). A Navy Reserve officer who also served in Afghanistan and Iraq with the U.S. military, Green can be reached at [www.dan-green.com](http://www.dan-green.com).*

